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Paul Crosthwaite

Fiction in the Age of the Global
Accident: Don DeLillo's *Cosmopolis*

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An early scene in Don DeLillo's latest novel, *Falling Man* (2007), describes a woman's response to a postcard delivered three days after the collapse of the World Trade Centre, from which her own husband narrowly escaped:

She glanced at the message, a standard scrawled greeting, sent by a friend staying in Rome, then looked again at the face of the card. It was a reproduction of the cover of Shelley's poem in twelve cantos, first edition, called *Revolt of Islam*. [...] The card was from the Keats-Shelley House in Piazza di Spagna and she'd understood in the first taut seconds that the card had been sent a week or two earlier. It was a matter of simple coincidence, or not so simple, that a card might arrive at this particular time bearing the title of that specific book. (8)

Later in the narrative, the same woman, Lianne Neudecker, is beckoned by her mother's art dealer partner to survey a still life painting by the Italian modernist Giorgio Morandi:

They looked together.

Two of the taller items were dark and somber, with smoky marks and smudges, and one of them was partly concealed by a long-necked bottle. The bottle was a bottle, white. The two dark objects, too obscure to name, were the things that Martin was referring to.

"What do you see?" he said.

She saw what he saw. She saw the towers. (49)¹

Later still, Lianne, a freelance copy-editor, negotiates with a client about editing a dense, obsessively researched book that "seems to predict" the September 11 attacks, naming "many things that actually happened or are happening now." The book details

a series of interlocking global forces that [appear] to converge at an explosive point in time and space that might be said to represent the locus of Boston, New York and Washington on a late-summer morning in the early twenty-first century. (139)

Each of these incidents illustrates the capacity of catastrophic events to invest existing symbolic artefacts with new meanings. In the wake of 9/11, the title of an early nineteenth-century poem recounting an uprising against the Sultan of Turkey inevitably invokes the recent irruptions of violence by Muslim fundamentalists; the mundane "kitchen objects" (49) in a painting of the 1950s assume the looming, ominous contours of the fallen twin towers; and a fringe, crackpot research project becomes a work of "visionary" importance, "at least in the publisher's planned catalog copy" (139).

Though not published until March 2003, DeLillo's previous novel, *Cosmopolis*, was, he reports, almost complete on 11 September 2001 ("Maybe I See," par. 4). He insists that the events of that day had "absolutely no influence on the book" ("Great American Novel?" par. 11). Nonetheless, as various critics have noted, the novel cannot now be read other than in relation to the terrorist attacks on New York and Washington, D.C.² That the text is now destined to be everlastingly suspended within the force-field of 9/11 is, I will argue, far from a matter of "simple coincidence." Nor, though, is it a case of specific prediction, such as that supposedly achieved by the book Lianne plans to edit in *Falling Man*.

¹ The painting resembles a series of still lifes produced by Morandi in 1955 and 1956. An example can be viewed at the web site of the National Gallery of Australia: <<http://cs.nga.gov.au/Detail-LRG.cfm?IRN=105807&View=LRG>>.

² See, for example, Bird; Boxall 223, 229; Donovan 195; Thurschwell, 279-80. Cowart apparently assumes that *Cosmopolis* was written *after* 9/11 (210, 214).

Discussing DeLillo's *Mao II* (1991) in the light of 9/11, Peter Boxall draws on Thomas Pynchon's recent introduction to George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* to distinguish between "prediction" – as the act of forecasting an event in its precise spatio-temporal coordinates – and "prophecy," which "finds some 'deeper' stratum, [which ...] gains some kind of access to the hidden underlying forces that continue to produce history" (158). Similarly, Adam Thurschwell suggests that DeLillo's novels display "a kind of prophetic foreknowledge, if not of the absolute specificity of the events of 9/11, then of their roots in the deep structures of western culture – economic, technological, and symbolic" (280). Joseph M. Conte likewise observes that such recurrent features of DeLillo's novels as terrorist attacks and the imposing forms of the World Trade Centre towers should be understood "not as premonitions of events as they have come to pass but as the gift of the novelist for expressing the latent crises in the culture before others have fully recognised them" (180).³ I agree with Boxall, Thurschwell, and Conte's identification of DeLillo as a "prophetic," rather than a "predictive," writer, but contend that the "underlying forces," "deep structures," and "latent crises" tapped in *Cosmopolis*, DeLillo's most concerted and compellingly "prophetic" text, require more extensive excavation than has so far been offered. Thurschwell argues that *Cosmopolis*

reads like an allegory of self-destructive overreaching by the Western global-capitalist machine and its subsequent comeuppance in the violence it engenders in those whom it pushes aside, an allegory whose symbolism is disturbingly close to the symbolic charge that the terrorists of 9/11 sought to deploy. (280)

In providing corroboration for this reading, however, Thurschwell neglects the "global" dimensions inscribed in the text itself, focusing instead on objects and events that appear on the single Manhattan street that constitutes the narrative's ostensible – that is, material and geographical – setting. He foregrounds the monumental apartment tower inhabited by the protagonist, Eric Packer, himself an embodiment of "Western capitalist techno-scientific rationality"; he points to Packer's eventual murderer, a dispossessed and vengeful former employee "who effects the *nom de terreur* 'Benno Levin' – a name that one would certainly read as alluding to the terrorist murderer 'Bin Laden' were it not for DeLillo's insistence that the novel pre-dated the event"; and he draws attention to the funeral of the rapper "Brutha Fez," whose music "seems to represent the possibility of the reconciliation of western culture and Islam through art, and whose death seems to signal the end of that possibility" (Thurschwell 279-80). In arguing for a similar "cognitive consonance" (Conte 180) between *Cosmopolis* and the events of September 11, Joseph M. Conte also leans towards scenes and characters that are tightly localized. He too dwells on Eric Packer's apartment building – "the residential complement of the Twin Towers" (181) – and relates not only Benno Levin but also a frenzied crowd of anarchist protestors to the Islamist terrorists who brought down the towers (187; 184-85). For Thurschwell and Conte, then, the "global" confrontation between Islamic fundamentalism and what Jacques Derrida calls "technocapitalist modernity" (Borradori 113) is played out in miniature, in *Cosmopolis*, on the streets of New York. But this is to underestimate the extent to which the global ramifications of localized events are made the subject of the narrative itself, as well as the way in which the text dramatizes not merely (or even primarily) the threat posed to western society by terrorist insurgencies, but also that society's structural and systemic vulnerability to a host of escalating, pandemic crises.

In his brief consideration of *Cosmopolis*' "prophetic" impulse, Peter Boxall offers a more nuanced analysis. He focuses his attention on the "bank towers" seen by Eric Packer as he makes his creeping progress along 47th Street. The towers are described as "looking empty from here."

³ On the "prophetic" character of DeLillo's oeuvre (with particular reference to the prevalence of international terrorism and the recurrent appearance of the World Trade Centre), see Boxall, esp. chs. 6 and 8; DeLillo, "Intensity," par. 4; Leonard; Passaro; Rowe; Thurschwell 278-80, 298 n. 7.

They were made to be the last tall things, made empty, designed to hasten the future. They were the end of the outside world. They weren't here, exactly. They were in the future, a time beyond geography and touchable money and the people who stack and count it. (36)

Boxall assumes the "bank towers" to be the twin towers of the World Trade Centre, which "appear throughout DeLillo's oeuvre as a kind of delicate antenna, as a radio tuned in to tomorrow, a structure that can somehow negotiate between the spacetime of the twentieth century, and the unanchored time of electronic capital" (223). The towers are figured, then, less as physical buildings than as immaterial "nodes" in the virtual universe of digitized capital. Indeed, as Boxall notes, the very word "skyscraper" appears to Eric Packer as "anachronistic," a relic from "the olden soul of awe, [...] the arrowed towers that were a narrative long before he was born" (DeLillo, *Cosmopolis* 9; Boxall 223). For Boxall, the towers in *Cosmopolis* "are already in the process of disappearing, as if in advance of the terrorist attacks in 2001. [...] [T]hey are retreating to the future from which they have come to us on loan, getting ready to leave behind the rubble of Ground Zero in their place" (223). As he implies, the fate of the twin towers will not simply be to disappear, but to disappear precisely into the global flows of data and information that they once channelled. Destroyed in material space, their image will be resurrected in the deathless, virtual realm of the electronic archive. And it is via the endless repetition of their destruction in this medium that the event we now call "9/11" will achieve its planetary reverberations.

The full "prophetic" dimensions of *Cosmopolis* only emerge through a reading that maps, in detail, the text's sensitivity to the supersession of the material space of streets and buildings (and the modes of transportation that traverse them) by the virtual space of contemporary information and communications technologies, a shift which heightens the risk that a crisis unfolding in one location may radiate outwards to destabilize the entire socio-economic world-system. In offering such a reading, I draw on the work of the French philosopher of technology Paul Virilio. I show how *Cosmopolis* evokes the experience of temporal acceleration and spatial contraction that Virilio terms "tele-presence." The speed of the new digital technologies, coupled to the potential for escalating catastrophe inherent in their interconnectedness, is such, Virilio argues, that they simultaneously demand attempts to envisage the future and threaten to profoundly alter the course of global events in such a way as to defy all prediction. I examine the similarly complex exploration of futurity in *Cosmopolis*, and elaborate on my argument for the novel's own status as a "prophetic" text. *Cosmopolis*, I suggest, signals the profound challenges posed to novelists by the emerging potential for what Virilio calls the "global accident" – the accident "that would appear simultaneously to the world as a whole" (Virilio, "Silence," par. 2).

Globalization and Tele-Presence

Paul Virilio terms his theoretical approach "dromology" (from the Greek *dromos*: avenue or race course). He has defined it as "the study and analysis of the impact of the increasing speed of transport and communications" (Virilio and Parent 13). As an avowed phenomenologist, Virilio strives to give an account of the subjective and perceptual effects of differential rates of speed: he is particularly concerned with the ways in which technological rhythms shape experiences of time and space. For Virilio, the speed of human self-propulsion is normative. Hence, from the perspective of a horse-rider or car-driver, time passes "more quickly," in the sense that the durations of their journeys are shorter than for a pedestrian, and "the more the movement [*mouvement*] accelerates, the *more quickly* time passes" (*Negative* 44; emphasis added). Similarly, the faster a destination can be reached, the closer, in effect, it becomes.

According to Virilio, then, ever since humans first harnessed the "metabolic speed" of animals, their experiences of time and space have been subject to shifts and distortions. These tendencies were intensified, he suggests, by the "transportation revolution" that occurred in western societies in the late

nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Trains, automobiles, and aeroplanes effected radical contractions of travel time; simultaneously, they contributed to a concomitant “concatenation” or “disappearance” of space as destinations that would once have required days, weeks, or months of arduous travel to reach became accessible in mere hours. In texts such as *Polar Inertia* (2000 [1990]) and *Open Sky* (1997 [1995]), Virilio argues that a still more profound shift is underway in the contemporary era. Today, he suggests, we are witnessing the supersession of the “dynamic automotive vehicle,” whose environment is the railway, the road, or the air, by the “static audiovisual vehicle” (emphasis in original) – the television or computer screen that, via satellite and fibre-optic communications networks, may receive near-instantaneous or “real time” transmissions from the furthest reaches of the globe (*Polar* 18). In a remark that anticipates Eric Packer’s experience in *Cosmopolis*, Virilio speculates that “tomorrow” the “screen” will replace the “limousine” (*Polar* 15). Just as the furthest point in global space may be instantaneously rendered proximate through the conduit of the screen, so the subject envisaged by Virilio – the “tele-actor” – is simultaneously inert and radically dispersed across the myriad places to which the screen provides access (*Polar* 83, 86).

The spatial horizons of *Cosmopolis* are decidedly – even comically – narrow: it takes the entirety of the narrative, which unfolds over the course of a day, for the novel’s protagonist, Eric Packer, and the limousine in which he intermittently rides, to complete their traversal of the length of Manhattan’s 47th Street from the United Nations building in the east to Hell’s Kitchen (Eric’s childhood home) in the west – a distance of approximately two miles. DeLillo insists, though, that he thinks of the text “as a novel about New York and the world” (“Great American Novel?” par. 3). We might expect this to imply that his narrative will immerse itself in the enormous racial, ethnic, and national diversity evident on this single Manhattan street, demonstrating the way in which the entire world is represented in contemporary New York City. These are the terms in which the Chinese-American novelist Maxine Hong Kingston outlines her vision of a contemporary “global novel”:

The reason I was thinking of a global novel was that I began to notice that every city that I went to anywhere in the world is a cosmopolitan city. [...] In order to write a story about any city, any American city or any other city, you have to be able to write characters from every cultural background. A story of a city is also the story of all the people on the entire planet. (par. 23)

In *Cosmopolis*, New York is indeed figured as a city in which the entire world is present, though in a rather different sense to that identified by Hong Kingston: for the most part, the globally dispersed origins of the citizens who populate Manhattan’s streets are of less interest to Eric Packer, whose consciousness dominates DeLillo’s narrative, than the news images or financial data transmitted, near instantaneously, to his limousine from North Korea, Russia, or Japan. Indeed, just as it seems that a recent immigrant – Eric’s driver, Ibrahim Hamadou – is in the process of assuming something like the contours of an individualized subject within Eric’s mind, it becomes apparent that Eric conceives of him as little more than a composite of news reports beamed from distant war zones. When Ibrahim declines to respond to inquiries by a friend of Eric’s about a disfigurement he has suffered to his eye, Eric blandly recites a list of stock phrases that merge the specific suffering of his driver into the background hubbub of war and atrocity purveyed to western viewers by the 24-hour news media:

“You were beaten and tortured,” Eric said. “An army coup. Or the secret police. Or they thought they’d executed you. Fired a shot into your face. Left you for dead. Or the rebels. Overrunning the capital. Seizing government people at random. Slamming rifle butts into faces at random.” (168)

As Eric's limo idles in traffic, the numerous screens positioned around its interior display images and data transmitted in real time from Europe and Asia. Two distant outbreaks of violence – the murders of high-ranking business figures – particularly arrest Eric's attention. The first death is that of Arthur Rapp, managing director of the International Monetary Fund, who is attacked by a member of the crowd during an official visit to North Korea. He is "killed live on the Money Channel"; Eric watches this remote act of violence "happen again, in obsessive replays, as the car [crawls] towards a choke point on Lexington Avenue" (33). He anticipates that the news channels will show it "repeatedly into the night [...] until the sensation [drains] out of it or everyone in the world [has] seen it, whichever [comes] first" (34). The narrator's observation that, at the time of the attack, it is "past midnight in Pyongyang," (33) merely draws attention to the fact that events of this kind – broadcast live and globally – occur as much in global or "universal" time as local time. Later, Eric views a news broadcast from outside the Moscow home of the second murdered man, Nikolai Kaganovich, a Russian media oligarch, who has been "shot numerous times" (81). As if in an attempt to wrench this event back into the sphere of the local, even as their broadcasts initiate its global ramifications, the reporters covering the killing repeatedly refer to the dead man's villa as his "dacha": "they searched for security in the word, self-confidence. It was all they knew about the man and the crime, something Russian, that he was dead outside his dacha outside Moscow" (82).

DeLillo has observed that the events of *Cosmopolis* occur in an "exaggerated reality" ("DeLillo Bashful?" par 19). One of the facets of the novel that locate it beyond the realm of the quotidian is the unlikely confluence – over the course of a day's journey along a single street – of Eric's limousine and a Presidential motorcade (65), a large-scale anti-globalization riot (86-100), a lengthy and theatrical procession in honour of a dead rapper (130-39), and a film shoot involving three hundred naked bodies sprawled across the street (172-77).⁴ These scenes are, or rapidly become, media spectacles (76-77, 140; 89; 135; 172-74). Indeed, Eric prefers to watch the riot that occurs around him in Times Square on television, where it makes "more sense" (89); similarly, it tears "his mind apart, trying to see" the naked figures in the street "here and real, independent of the image on a screen in Oslo or Caracas." "Or [are] those places indistinguishable from this one?" he wonders (176). The coincident occurrence of these events can be read as a literalization of the tendency of satellite communications technologies to telescope simultaneously unfolding but geographically dispersed events so that they may be co-present in a single location.

Cosmopolis is "a novel about New York and the world," then, in which the local and the global undergo a disorientating collapse into one another. As Peter Boxall notes, "in the new space and time of electronic globalization [...] here can morph into there, the very possibility of distance gives way to an unboundaried, simultaneous presence" (222). As such, the text may be read as a requiem for the era belonging to the mode of urban space that provides its title – the "cosmopolis" or "world city" that has traditionally been the dynamic focal point for global flows of people and goods – and as a projected vision of what Virilio terms the "omnipolis," the world as city of the near future, in which "urban space [...] loses [...] its geographical reality," and those with access to the new technologies find that it is "no longer necessary [...] to journey, to depart, to go to things" because "everything is already there" ("Overexposed" 20, qtd. in McQuire 147; "From Modernism" 40).

Global Time and the Insistence of Futurity

As a further consequence of the emerging conditions of "tele-presence," Virilio anticipates the replacement of "local time" by "global time." Because images and

⁴ The scene of prone, naked bodies is clearly inspired by the work of the contemporary New York photographer Spencer Tunick. One of Tunick's images accompanied the extract from *Cosmopolis* published in the April 2003 issue of *Esquire* (Coward 211). For examples of Tunick's photography, see <<http://www.artnet.com/awc/spencer-tunick.html>>.

data can be disseminated over immense areas in intervals that verge on instantaneous,

for the first time, history is going to unfold within a one-time-system: global time. Up to now, history has taken place within local times, local frames, regions and nations. [...] But in the very near future, our history will happen in universal time, itself the outcome of instantaneity – and there only. (“Speed and Information,” pars. 9, 16)

History will not only increasingly happen in “universal time,” Virilio argues, but in what he terms “intensive time.” “History as the extensiveness of time – of time that lasts, is portioned out, organized, developed,” faces an unprecedented threat, Virilio suggests, from intensive time (Virilio and Lotringer 52). Under the latter conditions, “infinitely tiny portions of time contain the equivalent of what used to be contained in the infinite greatness of historical time”; “history is [...] written at the speed of light, which is to say in nanoseconds, picoseconds and femtoseconds” (Virilio, interview with Sans 113, 113-14). Eric Packer has first hand experience of this condition:

He thought of the people who used to visit his website back in the days when he was forecasting stocks, when forecasting was pure power, when he’d tout a technology stock or bless an entire sector and automatically cause doublings in the share price and the shifting of worldviews, when he was effectively making history[.] (75)

“No human being,” Virilio argues, “can be present in the intensive time that belongs to machines” (“Speed-Space,” 71). Historical processes in which humans may be “present” – those that occur in “extensive time” – emerge and develop gradually, over prolonged periods. Modern technologies have accelerated the rate at which events of historical significance unfold, but it is only with the advent of the “information revolution,” Virilio suggests, that humans are absented from the duration of such events. Like St. Augustine, who recognised the impossibility of experiencing the present, since it lacks all duration (Augustine bk. XI), the consciousness of the subject posited by Virilio can never be coterminous with the infinitesimally brief “event” of intensive time; rather, the subject may either respond to an event that has already occurred, occupying a present in which the event itself is past (a “present-past”), or attempt to anticipate the event, experiencing the “vertigo” of a future that, paradoxically, is “already here, already seen, already given” (*Open* 140).

DeLillo has said that he had been working on *Cosmopolis* for some time before it occurred to him that the day on which the novel is set should be the last day of an era – the decade-long interval between the end of the Cold War and the stock-market crash that occurred in the spring of the year 2000. He remarks, “April 2000 [was] the moment when the financial market collapsed, when recession took over from years of enormous growth. That was the end of a world. The twentieth century truly ended then” (Interview with Busnel, par. 28). DeLillo characterizes the ten year period that preceded this collapse thus:

Culture was boiling with money. Capital markets surged. Multinational corporations began to seem more vital than governments. CEOs became global celebrities. And ordinary people entertained dreams of individual wealth. The Dow kept climbing and the Internet kept getting swifter and more inclusive. The confluence of capital and technology seemed to accelerate time. We were all living in the future, at least for a while. (“Day in the Life,” par. 7)

The temporal patterning of *Cosmopolis*, he suggests, partakes of this “dromocratic” logic: “It’s a man’s life experienced in one compressed day, which tends to distort time in the novel” (“Quiet,” par. 11); “there’s a sense of acceleration of time and of reality itself” (“DeLillo Bashful?” par. 19).

The increasing necessity, and challenge, of inhabiting very short durations – what Virilio terms “intensive time” – receives particular attention in DeLillo’s novel. “Whatever events might constitute the next few hours, or minutes, or less” are “the only terms of life expectancy” Eric Packer has “ever recognized as real” (122). Eric’s currency analyst Michael Chin, with his “advanced degrees in mathematics and economics” (21-22), can find “subtle patterns” in the currency markets – “time cycles and price histories” – that unfold over “years, months, weeks” (37). As Chin resentfully observes, however, Eric is attuned to even narrower intervals: “You start finding hourly cycles. Then stinking minutes. Then down to seconds” (37). In an exchange between Eric and his wife of twenty-two days, Elise Shifrin, which adapts the terms of Andrew Marvell’s “To His Coy Mistress” (1681) to the age of cyber-capital, Eric argues that the compressed temporality of contemporary life necessitates the swift consummation of their marriage:

“We want to have it,” he said.

“Sex.”

“Yes. Because there isn’t time not to have it. Time is a thing that grows scarcer every day. What. You don’t know this?” (69)

On his way across town, Eric conducts his weekly meeting with his “chief of theory,” Vija Kinski. Prompted by the “glow of cyber-capital” on the screens that festoon the interior of Eric’s limousine, Kinski muses on “the idea” of “time” – “living in the future” (78) – in terms that resonate with Virilio’s analysis of modernity’s tendency towards the contraction of temporal duration. Like Virilio’s writings, too, Kinski’s speech has a rapid, extemporaneous quality that reflects the pace of the technological phenomena she discusses:⁵ “Clock time accelerated the rise of capitalism. People stopped thinking about eternity. They began to concentrate on hours, measurable hours, using labor more efficiently” (79). Kinski blithely admits that she understands “none” of Eric’s talk of “nanoseconds,” “zeptoseconds,” and “yoctoseconds,” but the simple fact that such units of measurement exist tells her “how rigorous we need to be in order to take adequate measure of the world around us” (79). Again like Virilio, Kinski suggests that when “the present” may consist of an interval of “one septillionth of a second,” it becomes “harder to find,” while “the future becomes insistent” (79). The present, she claims, “is being sucked out of the world to make way for the future of uncontrolled markets and huge investment potential” (79).

The fascination, which marks the exchange between Eric and Kinski, with the notion of a future that, in Virilio’s words, is “already here, already seen, already given” (*Open* 140) is mirrored by the ambiguous historical setting of the narrative itself. A page that precedes the first part of the novel apparently identifies the temporal location of the text with great precision: “IN THE YEAR 2000: A Day in April.” Significant details, such as the fictional managing director of the International Monetary Fund and the invented US President (“President Midwood”), quickly indicate that the narrative occupies an alternate reality, however. More specifically, though the novel is not set in the future, it inhabits a reality that is clearly *futuristic*. It is as if the narrative is projected into a time that not only lies beyond its ostensible historical setting, but is also anterior to the moment of the text’s own composition. The novel thus assumes the shape of an extended work of futurology or prophecy, an attempt to extrapolate from the present and recent past into the future. An array of imaginary technologies

⁵ Several scholars, including David Harvey and Douglas Kellner, have criticized Virilio’s style on the basis that it risks merely mirroring the high-speed dynamics it purports to analyze and critique (Harvey 351; Kellner 121-22). For Patrick Crogan, however, “this weakness is [...] also paradoxically what constitutes the strength of Virilio’s engagement with the aporia of speed” (168). It is debatable whether Vija Kinski’s analysis of technological acceleration is critiqued or endorsed by DeLillo’s novel. Varsava suggests that Kinski conveys “what Mikhail Bakhtin calls the ‘indirect authorial word’” (92). This ascription of Kinski’s views to DeLillo himself seems unduly confident, however. While Kinski’s remarks are broadly consistent with the general tenor of the text, and while the most notable aspect of her characterization is her inscrutability (see 78, 79, 85, 93), the very notion of a billionaire asset manager employing a “chief of theory,” must, at the very least, have satirical overtones with regard to the commodification, if not the acceleration, of cultural theory.

feature, including a wristwatch that can take photographs, display television and video footage, and access the internet (123, 206, 209);⁶ a voice-activated handgun (145-46);⁷ and a recreational drug called “novo” that “makes pain go away” (125).⁸ As Benno Levin observes in a section that presents itself as a transcription of his book of “confessions,” an obsession with such products is a key facet of Eric’s character:

He is always ahead, thinking past what is new, [...] always arguing with things that you and I consider great and trusty additions to our lives. Things wear out impatiently in his hands. [...] He wants to be one civilization ahead of this one. (152)

The “great and trusty additions to our lives” that Eric considers to be obsolete range from the electronic handheld organizer (9) to the “ear bud” worn by security operatives (19), the airport (22), the automated teller machine (54), the cash register (71), and the walkie-talkie (88). The voice-activated gun that Eric steals from his chief of security is a device that, in reality, does not even exist; but, in accordance with the logic of premature obsolescence that suffuses the novel, Benno thinks, “maybe it was advanced, maybe the military had scrapped it a day or two before” (203).⁹

Eric’s sensitivity to the future has been essential to his phenomenal success as an asset manager and stock forecaster. His almost mystical ability to attune himself to the fluctuations of the markets and anticipate their outcomes prompts his employees to refer to him, half seriously, as a “visionary” (19) and a “seer” (46). These epithets take on a bizarre new meaning in the light of Eric’s recently developed ability to, literally, see “things that haven’t happened yet” (22). Appropriately enough, given the integrality of the new audiovisual technologies to Eric’s forays into futurity, his glimpses of forthcoming events typically appear on-screen, whether in his limo or on his wristwatch. The first such incident is uncanny but, in comparison with what is to follow, almost innocuous:

Eric watched himself on the oval screen below the spycam, running his thumb along his chinline. The car stopped and moved and he realized queerly that he’d just placed his thumb on his chinline, a second or two after he’d seen it on-screen. (22)

Sitting in his car in Times Square while the anti-globalization riot rages around him, Eric sees his on-screen image “recoil in shock”; moments later, there is “a detonation, loud and deep,” and he recoils “for real” (93, 95). He explains to Vija Kinski, who witnesses this strange occurrence, that he has had a number of similar experiences; concerned that his company’s network has been interfered with, he has “had our computer security tested,” but there is “nothing amiss” (95). Kinski speculates that Eric may be an avatar of his culture’s obsession with the future: “There are rare minds operating, a few, here and there, the polymath, the true futurist. A consciousness such as yours, hypermaniacal, may have contact points beyond the general perception” (95). During the stand-off between Eric and Benno Levin at the close of the novel, Eric experiences an unfamiliar wave of guilt for the lives he has directly and indirectly destroyed. In an act of self-mortification that carries overtones of the stigmata appropriate to his quasi-messianic persona, Eric shoots himself through the hand: he realizes the gun has one round left “the briefest instant before” it fires (197). Finally, Eric sees a body,

⁶ Various wristwatches incorporating one of these functions exist, or are in development, but none resembles the genuinely multimedia device owned by Eric.

⁷ A patent for a voice-activated toy airgun was filed in 1997, but no military specification weapon is currently available (see <<http://www.freepatentsonline.com/5724955.html>>).

⁸ It seems unlikely that “novo” is simply an abbreviation of “novocaine.” Though the latter substance is an analgesic, the “delirium” (128) and the separation of “mind from body” (127) elicited by novo are effects linked more closely to ecstasy or dissociative anaesthetics such as ketamine. Novo, the “latest drug” (125), is most likely only connected to novocaine insofar as its name denotes a novel synthesis.

⁹ On the discourse of obsolescence in *Cosmopolis*, see Boxall 222; Cowart 214-16; Varsava 85-86.

which he soon recognizes as his own corpse, displayed on his crystal watch display. He wonders, "Have all the worlds conflated, all possible states become present at once?" (205). The reader carries to this scene his or her own glimpse of the future: an extract from "The Confessions of Benno Levin," which appears at the end of Part 1, describes its author's examination of Eric's corpse (55-61).¹⁰ The final lines of the novel, however, offer a muted affirmation of the embodied present (a gesture mirrored by the adoption of the present tense), even as Eric confronts the annihilation of his future self: "This is not the end. He is dead inside the crystal of his watch but still alive in original space, waiting for the shot to sound" (209).

Prophecy, Contingency, and Catastrophe

Cosmopolis is very clearly concerned with the notion of prescience, and with the ways in which the speed of contemporary existence demands attempts to foresee or predict future events – whether technologically progressive or disastrous. As I have noted, critics have been struck by the signs of prescience displayed by DeLillo's novel itself, specifically in relation to the terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001. It seems that his decision not to revise the text in the wake of 9/11 derived not merely from a reluctance to tamper with the narrative's historical setting, but also from a sense that, even in its existing form, the novel already spoke to the events of September 11: "Even weeks after the event, I didn't feel I had to change anything in *Cosmopolis*. And why should I? After all, the book is set in 2000, and there was no reason to shift it to the present or to react to what happened. Nevertheless, my book deals with the events of September 11 on a deeper level" ("Maybe I See," par. 4). DeLillo acknowledges that September 11 was too disjunctive an event for a novelist to have foreseen with any accuracy – "To say that I explicitly anticipated the events of 9/11 [...] I hardly think so! How could I do this?" (par. 8) – but notes that *Cosmopolis* addresses itself to the broader conditions of September 11 in as much as it explores, firstly, the "effect [...] on people" of a "shock" on the scale of "an economic collapse," and, secondly, "the phenomena of simultaneity" (par. 6). That *Cosmopolis*' pertinence seemed heightened in the post-9/11 period in which it emerged may be attributable, then, to the way in which the terrorist attacks demonstrated the emerging propensity for globally proliferating disaster that the novel foregrounds. While the novel evokes a vision of accelerating technologies propelling individuals towards a radiant and already apprehensible future – a sensibility DeLillo takes to be characteristic of western culture in the 1990s – it also acknowledges the potential for occurrences capable of diverting such progressive trajectories, and which in their "very nature [elude] all [...] 'pre-destining' or explanation in terms of a foreseeable outcome" (Crogan 173). Virilio terms this mode of event "the accident." In what follows, I relate this conception both to *Cosmopolis* and to contemporary novelistic practice more broadly.

For Virilio, the accident is the necessary, yet largely unacknowledged, correlate of the processes of technological modernization:

Every technology produces, provokes, programs a specific accident. For example: when they invented the railroad, what did they invent? An object that allowed you to go fast, which allowed you to progress – a vision à la Jules Verne, positivism, evolutionism. But at the same time they invented the railway catastrophe. (Virilio and Lotringer 38)

In an attempt to redress what he perceives to be an elision of the accident in established historiographies, Virilio grants it a privileged role in his own. Patrick Crogan summarises the temporality of the accident thus: "The accident is unforeseen; when it happens it changes everything suddenly, like a vehicular accident that violently and unexpectedly breaks a journey. [...] The accident threatens the possibility of achieving a rational, homogeneous, linear development" (174). As Virilio's analysis makes clear, accidents have plagued all

¹⁰ On the structure of the novel, see Valentino 152.

technological societies. Though they grew rapidly more common and severe with the onset of industrialization and the “transportation revolution,” they nonetheless continued to be “localized in space and time: a train derailment took place, say, in Paris or Berlin; and when a plane crashed, it did so in London or wherever in the world” (Virilio, “Silence” par. 2). With the advent of globally interconnected information networks, Virilio argues, the potential – and already, in some cases, actual – scale of the accident has vastly expanded, to the point that we now face “not [...] a local accident in a particular location, but rather [...] a global accident that would affect if not the entire planet, then at least the majority of people concerned by [communication and telematic] technologies” (*Very Worst* 92-93, qtd. in Redhead 46). The global accident occurs, then, in intensive time and universal time – both instantaneously and simultaneously.

Cosmopolis confronts the emerging potential for abrupt, pandemic shock through an exploration of the sudden collapse of the world’s financial markets – an event that Virilio has identified as a harbinger of the global accident (*Unknown* 27). Virilio describes the stock exchange system as the “major clinical symptom” of the global “omnipolis” (*Open* 83). This system is particularly likely to trigger global accidents, he suggests, because “a very small occurrence changes everything, as the speed of quotations and programmed trading spreads and enhances any trend instantaneously” (“From Modernism” 41). For *Cosmopolis*’ Vija Kinsky, the financial market is “a system that’s out of control. Hysteria at high speeds, day to day, minute to minute. [...] We create our own frenzy, our own mass convulsions, driven by thinking machines that we have no final authority over” (85). Inevitably, she suggests, “something will happen soon, maybe today, [...] to correct the acceleration of time” (79). The “something” that does indeed occur is an imaginatively transfigured version of the bursting of the so-called “dot.com bubble” in the spring of 2000, which saw the Nasdaq Composite index plunge from an all-time peak to lose a third of its value in one month. This downturn was precipitous enough in reality (propelled, as it was, by adjustments ramifying across the globe at something approaching the speed of light), yet, like every other major incident, its duration is compressed still further in *Cosmopolis* – into the interval of a single day. In the novel, the plunge in the markets is triggered by Eric Packer’s reckless strategy of speculation against the yen: he borrows the currency “at extremely low interest rates and [uses] this money to speculate heavily in stocks that [will] yield potentially high returns”; but the stronger the yen becomes, “the more money he needs to pay back the loan.” He continues to pursue this tactic because he knows “the yen [cannot] go higher. [...] The yen itself knows it [cannot] go higher. But it [does] go higher, time and again” (84). As he watches “his fund’s numbers sink into the mist on several screens” (115), Eric is acutely aware of the interconnectedness, and hence susceptibility to cascading crisis, of the world financial system:

There were currencies tumbling everywhere. Bank failures were spreading. [...] Strategists could not explain the speed and depth of the fall. [...] He knew it was the yen. His actions regarding the yen were causing storms of disorder. He was so leveraged, his firm’s portfolio large and sprawling, linked crucially to the affairs of so many key institutions, all reciprocally vulnerable, that the whole system was in danger. (115-16)

The sheer speed of the collapse becomes starkly apparent during the scene depicting a sea of naked figures lying in the street for the purposes of a film shoot. Eric removes his own clothes and lies beside a woman (who, in one of the text’s many “fated” coincidences, turns out to be his own wife, Elise Shifrin); she informs him that “the financing has collapsed. Happened in seconds apparently. Money all gone. This is the last scene they’re shooting before they suspend indefinitely” (175). Appropriately, the scene of sprawled bodies itself evokes, for Elise, the aftermath of an unforeseen disaster: “I assumed an awkward pose intentionally. Whatever has happened to us, I thought, probably happened without warning and I wanted to reflect that by individualizing my character” (175).

Though the operating times of technological systems have grown increasingly intensive in recent decades, Virilio notes that the cumulative outcomes of such operations are still widely assumed to be amenable to statistical modelling and forecasting. This is the view taken by the staff of Packer Capital in *Cosmopolis*, who tend to “trust standard models” (21) and are eager to “locate predictable components” (46). Faced with a rise in the yen that “doesn’t chart” (21), Eric’s experts “have struggled and just about given up” (86). Eric, for his part, takes a more sophisticated approach, pointing to “a pattern latent in nature itself,” but he, too, aspires to “explain the yen” (63). For Virilio, the accident is that which, in its radical contingency, defies any attempt at modelling or projection (Virilio, *Paysage* 112, cited in Crogan 171-72). According to several characters in *Cosmopolis*, the unprecedented strength of the yen, and the systemic failure that results from it, demand to be conceptualized in these terms. Vija Kinski takes this view to its “nihilistic” extreme: she associates the approach taken by Eric’s employees with “a sensible text that wants you to believe there are plausible realities [...] that can be traced and analyzed. [...] That wants you to believe there are foreseeable trends and forces. When in fact it’s all random phenomena” (85). Benno Levin is more considered. He tells Eric, “you forgot something along the way. [...] The importance of the lopsided, the thing that’s skewed a little. [...] You should have been tracking the yen in its tics and quirks. [...] The misshape.” Eric, recognising that there is “something in what” Benno says, responds, “The misweave” (200). For Virilio, a paradox inherent to the accident is that, though “unlikely” and “unusual,” it is also “inevitable” (Virilio, *Paysage* 112, trans. by and qtd. in Crogan 172). Something of this tension between unpredictability and inevitability is captured in the observation – repeated in various forms in the first half of *Cosmopolis* – that, though the yen “can’t go any higher,” it continues inexorably to do so (see 21, 40, 46, 84). More broadly, the way in which the novel alters the facts of the stock-market collapse, as well as the text’s futuristic temporality, suggest contingency – the crash could have occurred under different circumstances, at a different time – whilst simultaneously evoking a sense of ineluctability – a crisis of this kind is shown to be the necessary product of contemporary global conditions.

I wish to close by reflecting more broadly on the implications of the global accident for the contemporary novel. The notion of “extensive time” discussed by Virilio connotes historical developments that are not simply prolonged, but which also unfold in a relatively linear, and hence predictable, manner. Virilio claims that extensive time is the time of “stories” and “writing” (“Speed-Space,” 71), amongst other cultural phenomena. The accident occurs in something much closer to intensive than extensive time, with the result that it may well be over before it can be fully registered by those experiencing it – much less represented by a writer. The intensive temporality, and the unpredictability, of the accident thus present unprecedented challenges to traditional novelistic practice. The novel rose to prominence during the era of the local accident: no matter how devastating, an event of this kind could not sufficiently divert ongoing and momentive social and cultural processes as to threaten the novelist’s ability to fashion a vision of the present that would remain apposite into, at least, the near future. The direct effects of, for example, a train derailment in Paris would also, of course, be correspondingly less severe in London than in the locality of the accident itself.

In his influential defence of the traditional realist or social novel, “Stalking the Billion-Footed Beast” (1988), Tom Wolfe remarks that, “American society today is no more or less chaotic, random, discontinuous, or absurd than Russian society or French society or British society a hundred years ago. [...] It is merely more varied and complicated and harder to define” (xix). One “varied and complicated” phenomenon that demands the writer’s attention, he suggests, is the increasingly visible presence in American cities of the “fourth great wave of immigrants – this one from Asia, North Africa, Latin America, and the Caribbean” (xx). Here, then, the contemporary realist novel advocated by Wolfe intersects with the spatially located but ethnically diverse “global novel” envisioned by Maxine Hong Kingston. Does the large-scale influx of non-white groups render America’s “cities incomprehensible, fragmented beyond the grasp

of all logic, absurd, meaningless to gaze upon in a literary sense?" Wolfe asks; "Not in my opinion" (xx). If radical discontinuity is to become the reigning mode of global culture, however, it will be precisely because trends – such as mass migration – which have, as Wolfe notes, followed established trajectories over extended periods are profoundly and persistently eclipsed by a succession of instantaneously-occurring and unpredictable global accidents. Clearly, it would be reckless to suggest (as Virilio at times appears to) that such a situation is an imminent possibility. Yet, even in the period since Wolfe wrote his essay, the extensive and the local have manifestly lost ground, as determinants of historical change, to the intensive, the global, and hence the accidental.

The events of 11 September 2001 are indicative of this shift. Steve Redhead notes that, for Virilio, it was a consequence of "the new communication technologies such as satellite [and] digital" that the collapse of the World Trade Centre "was not simply a local, catastrophic event but a global 'accident' shown 'live' [...] around the world at the same moment" (4; see Virilio and Lotringer, *Crepuscular*). DeLillo clearly considers the effects of the attacks to be commensurate with their global exposure: in May 2003 he remarked, "everything has changed since September 11. There is a new perception" ("Great American Novel?" par. 12). Part of this new perception, he suggests in an essay written in the aftermath of the attacks, is a change in American's attitudes towards the future. Repelled by the perceived futurity of American technoscience, the objective of the terrorists was "to bring back the past" ("Ruins," par 5). However, time seems, if anything, even "scarcer now," more "compressed," "hurried," "forced," and "distorted," though for new reasons: "There is fear of other kinds of terrorism. [...] We are trying to name the future, not in our normally hopeful way, but guided by dread" (pars. 67, 71). Traditionally, the best guide to the future – for the novelist and others – has been the present. Yet what if the present contains hidden potentialities whose profundity is matched only by their unpredictability? As the critic James Wood wrote after September 11, "Surely, for a while, novelists will be leery of setting themselves up as analysts of society, while society bucks and charges so helplessly. Surely they will tread carefully over their generalisations. It is now very easy to look very dated very fast" (10). In light of this, the full achievement of *Cosmopolis* becomes apparent: not only does it dare to offer a penetrating, wide-ranging societal analysis, but it is this very analysis, in highlighting the potential for a cascading global crisis, which renders the text immune to the condition of premature anachronism that Woods imagines as the fate of many contemporary novels. *Cosmopolis* did not predict 9/11, but it does display an acute sensitivity to the structural conditions underpinning the "global accident", of which 9/11 is one, contingent example. That events would transpire to throw this sensitivity into sharp relief is, moreover, an expectation that pervades the text itself. In the wake of 9/11, then, the meaning of DeLillo's novel is not so much altered as *realized*, as it enters into the ambit of the accident that it will now always have anticipated.

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